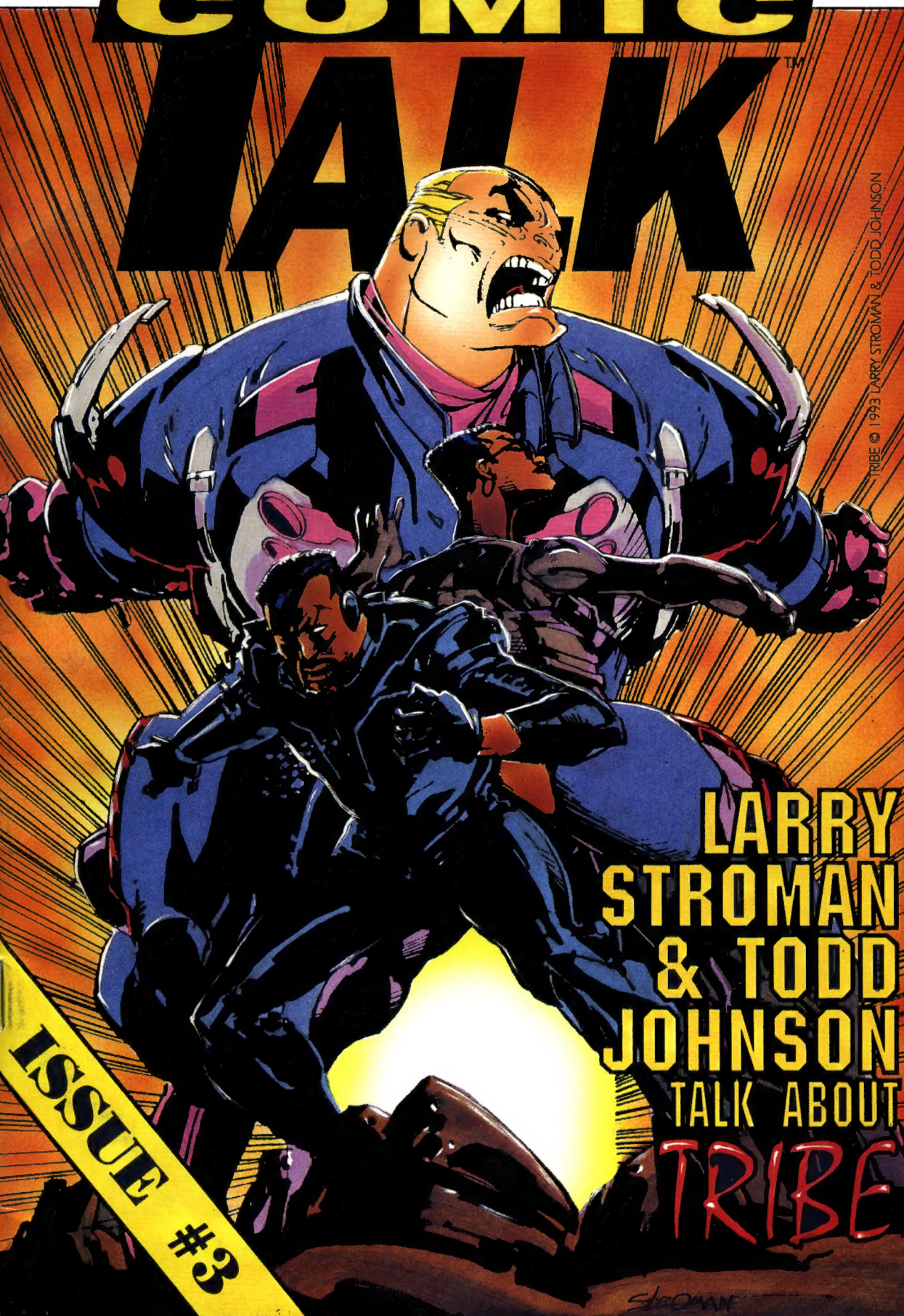
COMIC TALK #3 • MAY 1993 • $2.50

COMIC TALK™



LARRY STROMAN & TODD JOHNSON TALK ABOUT TRIBE

ISSUE #3

COMIC TALK

VOLUME 1 - NO. 3
MAY - 1993

PUBLISHER
Fred Greenberg

EDITOR
Ed Polgardy

ASSISTANT EDITOR
Denise Trunk

LAYOUT & GRAPHICS
Valerie Matis
James Benes

GRAPHICS ADVISOR
John Workman

COVER
Larry Stroman

INTERVIEWER
Tim Higgins

STAFF
PHOTOGRAPHER
Phil Marino

All of the art work that illustrates this interview is trademarked and copyright © 1992 Larry Stroman and Todd Johnson. Larry Stroman and Todd Johnson interview © 1993 Tim Higgins.

COMIC TALK is trademarked and copyright (c) 1993 **Buffalo Books**, all rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced in any form, mechanically, photographically, and/or electronically, without prior written consent of the publisher. All comic book characters, names, logos, trademarks, and symbols depicted and described in interviews, on the cover, in ads, and/or any other editorial materials are trademarked and copyright (c) their respective owners.

All inquiries (including advertising) and letters to the editor should be addressed to: **COMIC TALK**, 225 Everitts Road, NJ 08551-1610,or call (908) 788-2780.

Any statements or opinions made, expressed or implied in **COMIC TALK** are solely those of the interviewer or persons being interviewed and do not represent the editorial position of the publisher, who accepts no responsibility for such statements.

Printed in the USA.

INTRODUCTION

Larry Stroman and Todd Johnson represent, in more ways than one, the new generation of comic book creators. Both are 31, and were weaned on the Marvel and DC comics of the '60s and '70s. Currently, they are working on Tribe, one of the latest titles from Image Comics.

Their collaboration, based on several years as good friends, is like most relationships between comic book writer and artist. It is one of long distance. Stroman, who lives in Brooklyn, has worked in the past for both Marvel and DC., penciling such popular titles as X-Factor and World's Finest.

Tribe is Johnson's first venture into writing comics, although as the owner of two comic book specialty stores in Detroit, he is certainly no stranger to comics. Hashing out story and art ideas over the phone, or via their trusty Fax machines, Stroman and Johnson have managed to create a unique super-hero team, based on action, not soap-opera-like interrelationships. While many of Tribe's characters may seem familiar (how many variations of super-mutants can you come up with?), it is the stories behind the super powers that both Stroman and Johnson are anxious to tell.

In the following interviews, we first talk with Larry Stroman...exploring his early interest in art, his experiences in the comic book business as well as some personal thoughts on the industry as a whole.

Next, is a conversation with both Larry Stroman and Todd Johnson in which they share with you the development of many of Tribe's characters and the future of their new super-hero team.

TIM HIGGINS

LARRY & TODD:

"I THINK WHEN YOU HAVE TWO INDIVIDUALS WHO ARE BASICALLY CREATIVE PEOPLE WORKING ON THE SAME PROJECT, THEY HAVE TO HAVE AN UNDERSTANDING."

Tim Higgins: What was the first company you worked for?

Larry Stroman: My first job was doing backup stories for Howard Chaykin in American Flag.

Higgins: When you say you did backup stories, did you do the whole thing?

Stroman: I did the penciling. I pretty much have been a penciler up until recently.

Higgins: Up until Tribe's conception?

Stroman: Yeah.

Higgins: And now you also do the coloring?

Stroman: No, just penciling and inking and working on the stories.

Higgins: After working for Howard Chaykin, what did you do then?

Stroman: After I did those few things I penciled a couple of stories for DC Comics.

Higgins: And then you moved to Marvel?

Stroman: Not exclusively. I did some stuff for other people here and there while I was at Marvel.

Higgins: When an artist gets a script in the mail for an upcoming issue, is it written like a script for a movie or is it in a very literate, written prose form?

Stroman: Well, I'm not really familiar with movie scripts. Usually what I get are plots which are very simple descriptions of pretty much what happens within the space that you have to work in.

Higgins: Is there also dialogue?

Stroman: Sometimes there's dialogue. If it's something really important you'll get dialogue.

Higgins: Is that difficult reading those words, reading a general plot description and then trying to come up with sequential narrative?

Stroman: No. It comes with time. When you've done it enough times it becomes very easy. The only real problem comes in your interpretation of something as opposed to how the writer may have expected you to interpret it. You might do a scene and the writer will say that's not exactly how I wanted it to be. Sometimes that becomes just a little bit of a problem.

Higgins: Is there ever a conflict of interest where you might have a disagreement that would alter the story in any way?

Stroman: There have been things that I took upon myself to do. I think when you have two individuals who are basically creative people working on the same project, they have to have an understanding.

Higgins: When you get an outline like that, you're getting a complete story. They don't leave you hanging and expect you to finish it somehow.

Stroman: I'm paid to do a story from beginning to end...to write it and pencil it.

Higgins: That would take a certain creative license. I know you went to art school for a short time. Can you tell me about that?

Stroman: Most of my schooling, as far as art school goes, was a few courses here and there. You know, little Saturday courses at art school. I had only completed one year of college but I didn't continue because I had had a job

and they were going to offer me a full-time position as soon as I got out of school.

Higgins: Was it art related?

Stroman: It was a graphics job.

Higgins: What would have been more lucrative?

Stroman: I was more interested in being an artist than I was in being a draftsman.

Higgins: Was it a comic book artist that you wanted to be or a commercial artist?

Stroman: At the time I wasn't really sure. I thought I knew what I wanted to do but couldn't make a decision. That's why it took me about a year and a half to decide. Prior to that I was hanging out at libraries and museums.

Higgins: You were born and raised in Boston?

Stroman: Yes, that's right. I then moved to New York about 10 years ago. I've been in Brooklyn for about six years.

Higgins: While growing up in Boston you had access to a great fine art heritage.

Stroman: Right. I practically lived at The Boston Public Library. I spent more time there than I did at school or any place else.

Higgins: How old were you when you were doing this?

Stroman: I started when I was about 10 or 11 years old. My first interest was in science fiction and space travel. I would spend a lot of time flipping through books on astronauts and eventually worked my way into other sections of the library.

Higgins: Do you consider yourself self-taught for the most part?

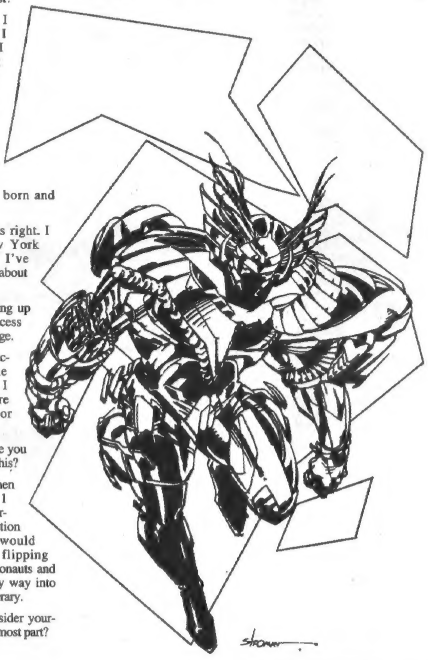
Stroman: Yes.

Higgins: What do you study on your own? Figure drawings?

Stroman: First of all, you should know that there's more to being a professional artist than just drawing pictures of nice looking women. There are just so many other things you need to learn.

Higgins: I think kids who are growing up today look at comic books and say 'oh I can do that kind of stuff,' but they really don't know the technical side of drawing.

"I WAS MORE INTERESTED IN BEING AN ARTIST THAN I WAS IN BEING A DRAFTSMAN"



Stroman: They can do it in the sense that they could look at something and then copy whatever it is. That's how everybody learns how to draw. But what they don't realize is that people have to create something new over and over again...without something to copy. That's the part that they will eventually learn or not learn.

Higgins: I know there's a lot of books coming out now like Burne Hogarth's. He has a whole series of books out, such as How to Draw the Human Figure. I often wonder what many comic book artists are doing today, and whether anyone is really paying attention to the way Burne Hogarth was drawing back then.

Stroman: They will. Kids who are into really exciting comics today aren't going to pick up on that stuff right off. That's the kind of information they have to search for whereas they could just go to the comic store and get all the good comics that they want. They're more interested in the comics anyway. As they start to develop an interest in becoming a comic book artist, they'll find those resources.

"BUT CERTAIN PEOPLE, FOR SOME ODD REASON, FUNCTION BETTER WHEN THEY ARE LEFT TO THEMSELVES"

Higgins: How did you come across information like that, being self-taught?

Stroman: Like I said earlier, by going to the library all the time.

Higgins: And in the library you found just books on drawing in particular?

Stroman: I found books on everything. Books on how to draw every type of thing there is.

Higgins: You're not recommending that everyone go out and be

self-taught. You still recommend school as a way of learning.

Stroman: I would always recommend school but certain people, for some odd reason, function better when they are left to themselves. There is always something to learn at school. I may have not learned a lot about drawing when I was in school but I learned about photography, sculpture, and art history. There's just so many other things to learn.

Higgins: It's that well-rounded education. Was there anyone in particular that you were following at the time? Any one particular drawing style that you were looking at?

Stroman: No. Well, I've always been into realistic drawing. I like stylized stuff too, but I've mostly stuck to the realistic drawing. There was never anyone in particular. With each week, there came an interest in someone different.

Higgins: Did you go through old masters?

Stroman: I went through everybody. I mean from the earliest of caveman drawings until present. Whatever it was, whatever type of style, I studied it. You know, abstract, impressionists, all of it.

Higgins: I think anyone looking at your work would realize you're an accomplished draftsman. Is there any correlation between what you're doing in comic books right now and any comic books that you saw growing up as a kid. In other words were you influenced by maybe a Kirby style, or Kirby layout, or maybe a Ditko characterization?

Stroman: What I hear the most from people is that they can not figure out where my style comes from because they don't see any particular influence. I was inspired by the same people that everyone else was inspired by. It's just that I didn't take that much from them. If someone was inspired by a particular artist, they would just study that individual's work. I never did it that way. I would say this guy draws great hands, so I'll study his hands.

"I TRY TO THINK OF EACH PAGE AS A SINGLE PIECE OF ART THAT WHEN YOU'RE FINISHED WITH IT YOU MIGHT HANG IT UP ON A WALL"

And this guy, he does great facial expressions, so I'll study his facial expressions. And this guy has nice background scenes, so I'll study his background scenes. Different people do different things very well and that's the stuff I like to study. The thing is you could sit down and draw everything, but unless you're able to draw it in a way that interests you then you're going to lose interest.

Higgins: Interesting. When you're sitting at your drawing board are you surrounded by a wealth of material that you can draw from?

Stroman: I usually start off with nothing. I just sit down, read the story, and start to lay it out relying strictly on my memory. Then when I hit certain points where I know I'm going to have trouble figuring out stuff, I'll pull out some references.

Higgins: You start out with a blank sheet of paper then. How do you arrive at a layout? I'm always interested in how an artist lays out his page and tells his story in that sequential narrative.

Stroman: I think most layouts just come from how you want to fill up space. Some artists are only interested in doing a story and when you look at the page as a whole it's not very interesting, but there is a story there. I prefer looking at an actual full page. I try to think of each page as a single piece of art that when you're finished with it you might hang it up on a wall. If all it consists of are panels of the same size, with figures of the same size, then it's not very interesting.

Higgins: So the idea then in layout is to keep the eye moving?

Stroman: Right. To have something interesting there...I mean because the first thing that's going to catch your eye when you walk into the store is the cover, so it has to be really nice. But most people when they walk in, even if they get as far as looking at the cover and pick up the book, they're just going to flip through

it in two or three seconds. If there's nothing there to catch their interest, they're just going to stick it back on the rack. And there may have been a great story between the covers but they'll never know it because there

wasn't enough on the pages to catch their interest. So I try to put in interesting designs and shapes. Hopefully people will at least slow down long enough to notice my panel layouts and give the story a try.

Higgins: Give me an idea of how long it takes from start to finish for a monthly magazine.

Stroman: I can finish a book in about two and a half weeks.

Higgins: And then it's off to the printer?

Stroman: It's off to the writer to script it, then it goes to the letterer and the colorist and all these people. There are a lot of people involved in putting a book out on a monthly basis. That's why there's always deadline problems.

Higgins: Now that you're working on Tribe, is it taking you longer since you're doing everything by yourself?

Stroman: Not really. But I'm also more involved with it now. Because it is my book, I'm more involved than I was with other projects. With the other books, I just did my job. Now I want to see every single step of the book. I want to see every single thing that happens. I want to know exactly how everything is going.

Higgins: Are you living, eating, and sleeping Tribe these days?

Stroman: Yes.

Higgins: Is that tough?

Stroman: There's not a day, not a moment that I'm not thinking of something having to do with this book. I could be sitting watching a movie and I'll say wow that would be a really nice scene to go into Tribe. When I'm speaking to people, listening to conversations, I'll write it down and say this would be nice in the book. It's just a continuous thing which is why it has to be interesting. If not, then it would be nothing but misery all the time.

Higgins: You're always working on deadlines...the worst crunch that anyone can face. Is limited time a problem?

Stroman: Well, the problem isn't being able to get the stuff out on time. The problem is being able to get the stuff out on time and trying to make it very good. Because any artist, if he had to, could put out a couple of books a month. But they wouldn't look as good.

Higgins: I remember when Jack Kirby was supposedly doing 12 pages a day at one time. Do you remember that?

Stroman: When we hear that, we're thinking of Jack Kirby's best work. We're saying, wow, he did 12 pages of that stuff? What you don't realize is that when he was doing that work, he was producing about half that amount but putting more work into the pages. The other stuff is like what I said before, just doing stories without any care put into page layout or anything.

Higgins: Larry, do you read a wide variety of comic books?

Stroman: Yeah. I don't really stick to anything in particular, I like to try different books.

Higgins: Because you are primarily involved in the super-hero

"THERE ARE A LOT OF PEOPLE INVOLVED IN PUTTING A BOOK OUT ON A MONTHLY BASIS. THAT'S WHY THERE'S ALWAYS DEADLINE PROBLEMS"

genre comic books, do you read other types of comic books as well?

Stroman: Yeah I like the old horror material. I also like old science fiction.

Higgins: Can you give me an example?

Stroman: Just like the old Marvel stuff back in the early '60s.

Higgins: How about contemporary books?

Stroman: Yes, even contemporary books. I get a stack of stuff, read one or two issues, and then just try out something else. I'm more likely to follow a book based on who the artist is rather than the actual story itself.

Higgins: Is there a particular artist that you're interested in right now?

Stroman: I like a lot of the newer guys such as Dwayne Turner and a friend of mine named Chuck Frazier.

Higgins: What are they working on?

Stroman: Chuck Frazier had done Kid N' Play. He also did the Marvel Year-In-Review stuff. Dwayne Turner did Cage. Now he's doing Hulk 2099 and a few issues of Wolverine. I think it really looks great. Another friend, Hannibal King, is doing a book called Cain. His work is really inspiring to me right now.

Higgins: When you say inspiring, how does it inspire you?

Stroman: It inspires me because these are guys who I not only consider good artists but I also consider them good friends. So, when we're sitting around talking and looking at each other's work I might say that I never thought of laying a page out that way or drawing the guy's face like that or doing hair that way.

Higgins: It's a constant learning experience, isn't it?

Stroman: You could draw thousands of figures and then look at someone else's work and they've drawn the figure in a completely different way. You have to always look for that diversity. I think a lot of artists end up messing themselves up because they reach a point where it's easy for them to draw figures and they think there's nothing else to learn. They don't realize that now they need to learn to draw that figure in a different way.

Higgins: Do you paint at all?

Stroman: I paint occasionally. I've done a couple of Alien Legion covers but right now I'm just more interested in telling the story than in doing single pictures.

Higgins: When you're penciling as much as you do, and it's a gruelling job when you have a pencil in your hand probably 12 hours a day, does switching from penciling to painting become a problem?

Stroman: No. It's actually easier. As a matter of fact I always find that after I've painted it's easier to draw. I don't know why. I think because when you paint you're learning more about rendering so that when you get to the pencils, which in comics has been done in a very flat way in most cases, you find yourself being able to just draw things much more realistically.

Higgins: When you're penciling a comic book, you do have to keep yourself to a two dimensional format, don't you?

Stroman: Right. That's for printing reasons but the coloring process is becoming so advanced in the comic business that now you can just sit and do so many different things.

Higgins: How do you allow for a colorist or an inker to come in and do things that maybe you didn't do with the pencils?

Stroman: Here's where the relationship you have with them comes into play. Sometimes you have this idea in your mind of what a panel should look like and then you get it back and it doesn't look like that at all. Other times you're not even thinking about particular scene that you've drawn and when it comes back and it's colored it looks a thousand times better than you ever would have imagined.

Higgins: So you don't hold yourself back when penciling to allow the inker or the colorist to enhance the panel?

Stroman: I don't think there's any point in which you should hold yourself back because then you just end up slowing the progression of yourself as an artist. If you keep pushing yourself, they'll keep pushing themselves, and the comic is going to keep getting better.

Higgins: Is there any difference between publishing companies like DC, Marvel, or Image?

Stroman: I think there's a certain way in which things are done in order to put out a comic so in that sense everything is pretty much the same. The only difference is the working relationship that you have with the people. I've never really had any problem working with any company that I've worked for. The only difference now is the fact that I'm working on my own book.

Higgins: People sometimes see Marvel as a comic factory rather than a creative outlet. What is your perception?

Stroman: Every company has to see themselves as a factory. That's the only way you're going to put out the books on a regular basis. If not, people would put out their books whenever they felt like it.

Higgins: Image, however, has had a problem with getting their books out on time.

Stroman: The reason why Image has had a problem getting books out on time is because they are a new company. Most companies start off with a group of people who run things then they hire artists and writers to come and do stories for them. Image is a group

"EVERY COMPANY HAS TO SEE THEMSELVES AS A FACTORY. THAT'S THE ONLY WAY YOU'RE GOING TO PUT OUT THE BOOKS ON A REGULAR BASIS. IF NOT, PEOPLE WOULD PUT OUT THEIR BOOKS WHENEVER THEY FELT LIKE IT"

"IMAGE IS SIMPLY GIVING ARTISTS AND WRITERS AN OPPORTUNITY TO WORK SOMEWHERE ELSE"

of artists who decided that they were going to form their own company. But now they need to hire people to run the business for them. Most people have no idea what it takes to put a comic book out. Quality books means great paper, great coloring, exciting stories and exciting art.

Higgins: I would agree with you. I think the production values are superb in most of the Image books. As soon as you join Image, are you able to take advantage of that production process?

Stroman: Yup. All you have to do is know what it is you want and then it's all there. The only drawback is the fact that fewer people are doing that type of coloring process. There's Polyoptics and Digital Chameleon who are doing probably the best color separation in comics right now. When only two companies are doing this type of work, then time is a problem. You have to wait a little while before they have time to get to your book.

Higgins: I think people don't really understand the process behind comic books.

Stroman: I didn't really understand it. I thought that after being in the business for as long as I had been that I knew how a comic was put together. I had no idea how many steps are taken...and I'm still learning.

Higgins: You told me that Jim Lee is the one that brought you into the Image group. Are you in touch with Jim Lee a lot?

Stroman: No. I speak to him occasionally. He's doing his own work and I leave him alone and I do my stuff and he leaves me alone. We speak now and then but pretty much we just stay to our own thing.

Higgins: Image seems to be a pretty tight group. When you see these guys at conventions do you spend much time together?

Stroman: Yeah. Sometimes we go out to dinner. If there's time, we'll sit down at the table, sign some books and talk.

Higgins: At Image the sole creative rights are yours. The creative output is yours. Do you see this as the future for the industry? Do you see Marvel having to go this route eventually?

Stroman: I have no idea. I'm not really that familiar with how the other companies work. I don't know whether this has even had an effect on Marvel.

Higgins: As Image grows, do you think Marvel should be looking over their shoulder at what Image is doing and wondering if they should be making some changes of their own? It just makes sense that Marvel would have to adopt some kind of policy to try and compete with Image.

Stroman: Image is simply giving artists and writers an opportunity to work somewhere else. Now, for all of the guys who said yes that they'd like to work for Image there were probably an equal number of guys who were perfectly satisfied with their present situation.

Higgins: Image is not necessarily appealing to disgruntled artists and writers who are looking for a creative outlet?

Stroman: These are guys who are not only good artists but they are also fans of a lot of guys. Here's an opportunity to have their favorite artist work for them within their own company. So now they can call people and say, 'I've always loved your stuff, would you like to do some projects for me?' I think that's great!

Higgins: Other than Tribe, is there anything else that you'll be working on for Image?

Stroman: Tribe's it for now.

Higgins: Is Tribe going to cross over into other Image universes and characters?

Stroman: Probably.

Higgins: Is it planned that way?

Stroman: That's up to the individual people. If I like a particular storyline and would like to have one of my characters in that book, I'd call up one of the guys and ask

if I use their character in my book or would you mind using my character in your book. That's how it works. There's no rule that says that you have to cross over with somebody else's book.

Higgins: Is there someone like Stan Lee at Image who's pulling all this together?

Stroman: Tony Lobito is the publisher.

Higgins: Does he have a grand scheme like Stan Lee?

Stroman: I don't quite understand exactly how it works. But because these are all individual guys they have the final say in what happens with their stuff whereas with Marvel or DC it's whoever's the head of that company that has final say on everything.

"NO, IT'S GUYS DOING THE KIND OF COMICS THAT THEY WANT TO DO. THAT'S ALL. IT'S NOT A BLACK/WHITE THING"

Higgins: What other independent companies have you worked for in the past?

Stroman: I did a couple of covers for Continuum and also some stuff for Continuity.

Higgins: There are new comic books coming out by black creators these days. Are they looking to capture a black audience? Is that the perception you have?

Stroman: No. It's guys doing the kind of comics that they want to do. That's all. It's not a

"IF PEOPLE READ MY BOOK THEY WILL NOT SEE ANGER AGAINST WHITE PEOPLE IN IT. WE'RE SIMPLY DOING THE TYPE OF COMIC STORIES THAT WE'VE ALWAYS BEEN INTERESTED IN"

black/white thing. If you grow up reading a particular type of book and have always loved this type of character, then that's the book you'll want to do. Other people grow up with an idea for a character and if they get a chance to do it, that's what they do.

Higgins: Does it stem from kids growing up watching a white Superman and not being able to relate?

Stroman: That has nothing to do with it.

Higgins: If I'm a black man and I turn on the television and I see nothing but white people I have nothing to relate to in the programming. If I pick up a comic book and see nothing but white super-heroes running around, once again there's nothing for me to relate to. That's not the way you see it?

Stroman: The way I see it is when I was growing up there were things on TV that were exciting to me. As I got older and went to the movies there were certain things I liked in movies. There were certain types of books I liked. I spent a number of years doing various types of comic books, but now that I have a chance to do my own comic book, I'm doing the type of stuff I like. I don't want people to say Larry's doing a book with black super-heroes because he's angry at the fact that all he got to see growing up were white super-heroes. If people read my book they will not see anger against white people in it. We're simply doing the type of comic stories that we've always

been interested in. When Todd and I sit and talk, it's about the kind of stuff that's entertaining to us. We don't sit back and say people are really go to hate this when they read it or people are going to be offended by this and let's hope they get the message. It's not that type of book. I don't think the Milestone guys are doing that either. Don't be misled by interviews with people because people say things wrong or people take them the wrong way or it just doesn't come out right or whatever. You can only really judge by the actual book. If you pick up the book and you're offended by that book, then you can complain about it but until you actually see the book you really have no idea what it is that they're trying to do.

"I'VE NOT HEARD THAT ANYONE KEPT ME FROM ANY JOB BECAUSE I WAS BLACK"

Higgins: When you say `we're', being misunderstood, are you talking about you and Todd?

Stroman: No. I'm talking about other people, other writers, other artists. I've spoken to a lot of people throughout the years who've told me different types of stories about things having been interpreted wrong. I mean when stories are edited certain things are taken out of context. You may think, oh wow, he's such an angry guy. I don't think people set out to do it purposely all the time. Sometimes it just happens.

Higgins: Not to linger on this, but as a black man, have you encountered any difficulties whatsoever in the comic book market?

Stroman: I probably have but nothing that I can pinpoint.

Higgins: Not a particular bias giving you one assignment rather than another?

Stroman: When I've gotten stories I know whether they had me in mind or not. As far as I'm concerned, I was a professional getting a job and I try to do the best that I can. I didn't know what anybody's motives were when they gave me that story. As far as any actual incidents? I don't know of any. I mean nobody's called me any names. I've not heard that anyone kept me from any job because I was black. That doesn't mean that it doesn't happen. It just means that I just don't know of it happening to me.

Higgins: As an independent contractor, you're basically a faceless person...I wouldn't know if you were black, yellow, white, red, whatever. I can't think of any instance where the industry has been guilty of any kind of prejudice.

Stroman: No. It happens because in this industry, just like in society, just like everywhere, you experience different kinds of prejudice. The comic industry is no different than any other industry. It's just that because there are not a lot of people in the comic industry, you don't hear much about it. If there were millions and mil-

lions of people involved in comic books like the magazine industry you probably would hear more stories.

Higgins: That brings up a good question because in the magazine market you tend to be a little more specialized. You are trying to hit various core groups. You don't find that in comic books...you're either writing to 12 year olds or 19 and above.

Stroman: But you see the thing is, we're not really familiar with the fact that comics specialize because what we see is mostly very popular super-hero comics. A lot of the stuff that's coming out is quite individualized.

Higgins: Have you ever read any books that were offensive to you?

Stroman: I've read a lot of books that were offensive to me, books that deal with basic social stuff or some particular type of humor or stereotype. Sometimes I don't even know if people are aware of what they're doing. They write with the attitude of, 'Come on loosen up, have a good time.' How can I have a good time when you're offending me?

Higgins: That's a good point.

Stroman: Now super-hero comics are written to cater to the majority of people who are buying comics, so you don't want to enforce any kind of religious or social belief.

Higgins: What about political beliefs though? I think comics can be accused of political leanings. Has anyone brought you a story politically inclined that you disagreed with?

Stroman: I've had stories with scenes that I refused to draw or things that I've changed. I mean, I'm not going to say what they are exactly.

Higgins: Oh, come on.

Stroman: No, no, I'm not going to do that because that's not what this interview is about. You see, a lot of guys who did those things were friends of mine and I told them about it. I'd tell them and they'd say, you know, I never thought of that, I'll change it. I've never quit a book because somebody wrote something that I didn't like. People are in a constant state of learning. People aren't always going to be doing the right thing. You have to be able to tell people what it is that bothers you and they either decide to change it or not. I got to a certain point in my life when I realized that more problems would be solved if people just took it upon themselves to confront the person who was causing the problem. There are a lot of guys in this business who spend a great deal of time arguing back and forth with each other. Writing bad stuff about each other over and over and I bet they've never spoken to each other face to face. What a waste of time. What a waste of space.

Higgins: But controversy isn't totally wasted. I think controversy helps the market in many ways.

Stroman: I think it's wasted if nothing ever gets solved. Everybody is entitled to their opinion about whether they like something or not but when it's constant and looks as if all they're doing is trying to get back at each other and not really solving anything then it's just a big waste of time. When I've had problems with certain guys in this business, I speak to them directly. I'm not going to be writing articles in newspapers, CBG or Comics Journal because

I'd rather read something else in those publications.

Higgins: In your opinion, is there something that's not being talked about that should be within the industry?

Stroman: I think that there's this elitist attitude that a lot of people have in this business that says there is a handful of writers or artists that no one else can ever be as good as. Every year the same people keep winning the same awards over and over and over. No one new is ever allowed to enter the arena. You might say to somebody, that last story he wrote was not that great. And they'd respond, "but he's a genius,it was an incredible story. You might think to yourself, 'it didn't even make sense.' Yeah, but he's a genius anyway. Why can't that guy be criticized like everybody else? So what if he's written 20 great stories. This particular story isn't that great.

Higgins: Are we putting comic writers and artists on a pedestal in this market?

Stroman: I think certain ones are put on a pedestal. I've had discussions like this with store owners about how people will comment on a particular writer and then you say well what have you read of this guy's work. They'll mention two stories of the guy's work and you wonder what their criteria is for a great writer. They'll say because everybody else says he is.

Higgins: Are there too many of those comic gods out there?

Stroman: No. There's actually only a handful of them, but that's all people do is just talk about these same couple of guys.

Higgins: And it's a growing market with sometimes 50 titles a week that come out.

Stroman: But how many of them do they write articles about? Maybe five of them. You could have a book that could sell record numbers but never be written about. There are guys who've been working for Marvel and DC for 20 or 30 years, who have been doing nothing but putting out work every single month for years and people never talk about them.

Higgins: I think there is a particular bias against people like Rob Liefeld in the industry even though I think it was his book that actually put Image above DC in the monthly ratings. That's speaks volumes in terms of the guy's marketability, but does it speak volumes of the guy's talent?

Stroman: Talent is whatever you determine is talent. There are guys who I think are great artists and you would say are terrible artists. There are a good number of people who think that Rob Liefeld is a great artist. Then there are people who don't think he's any good at all. But who really decides that? If you are a commercial artist and your job is to sell a product and you sell that product better than everyone else, then why shouldn't you be considered at least one of the best people in your field? The highest paid actors in Hollywood are not considered the best actors, they're just considered the highest

"THERE ARE GUYS WHO'VE BEEN WORKING FOR MARVEL AND DC FOR 20 OR 30 YEARS, WHO HAVE BEEN DOING NOTHING BUT PUTTING OUT WORK EVERY SINGLE MONTH FOR YEARS AND PEOPLE NEVER TALK ABOUT THEM"

paid. People go to see their movies, even if they're not considered as the best actors.

Higgins: That's not to say that Rob Liefeld is the Arnold Schwarztenegger of comics, is it? You know what I'm saying, the correlation's there. If Rob Liefeld makes a lot of money for comics that does not denigrate his talent. Rob Liefeld does make a lot of money for comics and has a great amount of talent. People look at Arnold and say he can't act but he sure brings a lot of money into the movie industry.

Stroman: So what is he doing then? He must be doing something. If you have a product and this product is suppose to be exciting, and it's exciting enough that people want to continue to buy it, then you are doing your job. These guys are doing their job.

"I LIKE TO GO INTO A COMIC BOOK STORE AND SEE THAT THE LAST COPY OF A BOOK WAS JUST SOLD. THAT TELLS ME PEOPLE ARE INTERESTED IN THE SAME THING THAT I'M INTERESTED IN."

Higgins: As a consumer I might think he's doing his job but I'm still demanding a little more from him.

Stroman: Then you should demand a little bit more of him. That's why we have so many books. People have that many interests. If I don't like one book I'll just go to another book. I'm not going to keep harping on the fact that I think that book is a lousy book. There are hundreds of other comics to choose from. There are artists in this business whose stuff I don't like. There are writers whose stuff I don't like. If the writing is so terrible don't buy it. I'll just go to something else. If worse comes to worse, create your own comic book. In a lot of cases, that's what has inspired a lot of people to do their own book because they weren't satisfied with what they were getting from everyone else.

Higgins: Was that one of the reasons for wanting to do Tribe?

Stroman: Actually I saw a lot of stuff that I liked, I just wasn't doing it. I was doing other people's stories which were good stories but I wasn't doing the type of stories that I wanted to do. I still like their books, still read them, but now I have an opportunity to do my own thing.

Higgins: Larry, when you're doing Tribe, is there a particular audience you're looking at or are you trying to appeal to everybody?

Stroman: First of all, because there's so much work that's involved with putting together comic books and doing it on a regular basis, you have to first appeal to yourself. This is the way I try to see things...if I go into a store and want to buy a certain book but that book is sold out or I'm interested in seeing a movie and there's this long line wrapped around the block, then I feel that I must have basically the same interests as other people do. So if I apply that same thinking to doing comics then hopefully it will have the same appeal. If I write books that I really like to

do, other people will pick up on it also. I like to go into a comic book store and see that the last copy of a book was just sold. That tells me people are interested in the same thing that I'm interested in.

Higgins: Is that an influence for you then? Do you go to the comic book store and do your own little market research?

Stroman: No. I just pretty much stick to whatever it is I'm interested in.

Higgins: You're not scoping out what other people are buying?

Stroman: I never check the top 10 list. I don't get into any of it.

Higgins: How old were you when you first knew you wanted to get into comic books?

Stroman: About 12 or 13.

Higgins: Do you remember which artists you first spoke to? Any particular names?

Stroman: The first artist that I ever spoke to at a convention was Frank Thorne who was doing Red Sonya at the time.

"I NEVER CHECK THE TOP 10 LIST. I DON'T GET INTO ANY OF IT"

Higgins: Oh yeah, really?

Stroman: I remember exactly what it was. We were sitting in the back of this room and I think it was Joe Sinnott who was talking about inking or something and Frank Thorne walked in. He sat maybe a couple of seats down from me. It was like wow there he is sitting right there, if I don't say anything he's going to get up and just walk away. I said I like your stuff, nice to meet you, whatever. He said would you like to talk about comics? I said yeah, great. So then we stepped outside and just stood there in the lobby for about half an hour or so and just talked about comics.

Higgins: That's great!

Stroman: That was one of the best experiences I've ever had and from that day on whenever I saw anybody that I wanted to speak to I just walked right up to the person and asked him questions. Whenever I got an opportunity to go up to somebody's studio, I would do that too.

"HERE ARE A GOOD NUMBER OF PEOPLE BUYING BOOKS AND NOT EVEN LOOKING AT THEM. I THINK IT'S SORT OF SAD THAT YOU'RE GOING TO SPEND MONEY ON COMICS AND NOT EVEN READ THEM"

Higgins: Is there anyone that you'd like to talk to today that you haven't had a chance to?

Stroman: I've met pretty much everyone except a lot of the foreign artists. I've met just about everybody who I've ever wanted to meet in this business. There are a lot of new guys who I would like to meet because I think they're doing good work.

Higgins: How about Bob Kane?

Stroman: I've seen him.

Higgins: How about Jack Kirby?

Stroman: Yup. I spent a couple of days talking to Jack Kirby at a convention once. I just would not leave the table. I was like that bothersome kid that wouldn't walk away.

Higgins: Still a kid. Still a comic fan.

Stroman: Yup. Even though I'm considered a professional in this business, I'm still like any basic comic fan. I mean I could pretty much go up to just about any artist that I know in the business and talk to them or call them up. Occasionally I'll take a trip up to Continuity and just sit around for a couple of hours talking to Neal Adams. I really enjoy that. I think I met Stan Lee for the first time about six months ago. It was just a hey how you doing kind of thing but it was still great. You're meeting these people that you were inspired by when you were a kid.

Higgins: And you're continuing that today. There is a certain historical legacy to comic books that is passed on from generation to generation. Do you feel that in any particular way? I mean do you feel you have a certain responsibility to passing on that love of comic books that you have?

Stroman: Yes. I think one of the only problems that I see in the business now is that there are a good number of people who are

buying books and not even looking at them. I think it's sort of sad that you're going to spend money on comics and not even read them.

Higgins: Do you think this is a speculator driven market for the most part? Do you think people are hoarding them for profit?

Stroman: I think a lot of it is just that. What's bad about it is that people are going to end up with a lot of comic books that are not going to be worth anything. They're going to have their valuable books but they're going to end up with a lot of books that will be worth nothing. Things are only valuable if they are valuable to you. I've seen books in twenty-five cent bins that were more valuable to me than any book that has hung up on a wall for 20 or 30 dollars, even though I would like to see one of my books up on a wall for 20 or 30 dollars. (laughs)

Higgins: I guarantee you, you will. Tribe #1 will be up there. There's going to be a Tribe #0, right?

Stroman: Yup.

Higgins: I guarantee that book will be up there.

Stroman: I think what's unfortunate is that a lot of people who are coming into this business now are disillusioned by the fact that there are books that are selling phenomenal numbers. They're under the impression that they can also do books that will sell that well. I think they should come in a little bit earlier to just do comics and give themselves time to develop as an artist or writer. But these days major changes are happening to all these characters, this guy gets killed off, this guy comes back to life, they appear on TV and all kinds of stuff.

Higgins: Are you hoping for a movie deal someday for Tribe?

"I'VE SEEN BOOKS IN TWENTY-FIVE CENT BINS THAT WERE MORE VALUABLE TO ME THAN ANY BOOK THAT HAS HUNG UP ON A WALL FOR 20 OR 30 DOLLARS"

Stroman: Of course. But I don't want it to be more of those cheap little nothing movies. (laughs)

Higgins: You don't want it to turn out like Captain America. Did you see Captain America the movie?

Stroman: Yeah. I think in a case like that it's people doing a project they just don't really care about. All they're interested in is finishing a movie. I would probably make a lot of money off a Tribe movie, but I wouldn't feel good if somebody did it just for the sake of doing it.

Higgins: Does that mean you wouldn't sell the rights to somebody unless you had creative control?

Stroman: Right. Well, it's not even a matter of creative control. It's a matter of the people who are doing the project really wanting to do a good job. We've seen the difference between the cheaper versions of superhero related movies to the high-quality, multi- million dollar movies. There's a big difference and the whole attitude is much different too.

Higgins: Larry, there's a whole lot of new comic book publishers. Topps is getting into the act. Valiant. Jim Shooter is now starting Defiant. Do you have any hopes for working for any of these new companies as time goes on?

Stroman: I always feel good every time there's a new company or every time a company's doing better. I think it's good for the industry in general. Whenever you have new opportunities, it makes your work that much better. Then you don't have to be tied down to any one company or any one idea.

Higgins: It seems to be a boom time. I'm not so sure for the publishers but for the creators there seems to be far more avenues for you to get your product out.

Stroman: Yup. It used to be you did a character, the company bought it from you, then it became their character. They would promote it, and maybe you would get a little bit of credit for it. Now you are the promoter. You are now the star of your creation. No longer are people buying the book because a company's label is on it. Now they buy books by specific artists and writers. Now the artists and the writers have become the stars and the companies are just becoming the carriers of the product.

Higgins: That brings us back to how people perceive comic books and the industry as a whole.

Stroman: I think if there's anything that I'm looking forward to in this business it would be unification...the comics in America with the comics of the rest of the world. There's very little foreign work that ever gets over here but they are publishing all the time. There must be some really great stuff but we just don't see. I would like to see my book printed in 10 different languages.

Higgins: Even though the comic book is in many ways an American art form, I think Americans would be the last to truly accept it as an adult form of entertainment. Do you think they still see it as kid's stuff?

Stroman: It's an old-fashioned kind of attitude towards comics. Often when people write about what's happening to comics now they'll pick the worst examples of people being mutilated, people being raped, all kinds of crazy stuff. Then they'll say, is this

what's happening to our kids' comics now? They forget that these are books that are done by adults for adults who happen to have this particular type of taste. Instead, it's oh this is awful because these books are being sold in the same store that kid's comics are sold. Just like when you go into a magazine store they have porno magazines with every other type of magazine. People don't say these are bad stores because they're selling porno magazines.

Higgins: They'll close down those magazine stores right along with the comic book stores. They lump it all together. There still isn't a distinction between magazines and comic books in that perception. I don't think we'll ever have Bill Clinton saying I read comic books or hey did you guys read the latest issue of Tribe, it was really good.

Stroman: I'm always surprised when I hear the amount of movie stars that collect comics but they never mention it. You never hear them talk about it. I hear that Clint Eastwood, Mark Hamill, and Steve Spielberg are all big fans. They never talk about comics even though comics may have been the inspiration for these guy's movies.

Higgins: Exactly. Sometimes you'll see a movie and think I saw that scene somewhere before or I recognize that idea and you know it came from a comic book but no one will ever admit that. So you've got a long struggle ahead of you.

Stroman: I don't know if it's a struggle. I don't even see it as a struggle because usually you struggle when you feel that you haven't gotten anywhere and that you still have some place to go. The comic industry is expanding so the only struggle is acceptance

"OFTEN WHEN PEOPLE WRITE ABOUT WHAT'S HAPPENING TO COMICS NOW THEY'LL PICK THE WORST EXAMPLES OF PEOPLE BEING MUTILATED, PEOPLE BEING RAPED, ALL KINDS OF CRAZY STUFF"

"YOU COULD READ IT THREE ISSUES LATER AND THERE MIGHT BE A WHOLE DIFFERENT GROUP. IT'S GOING TO BE A CONSTANTLY CHANGING SITUATION BECAUSE THERE'S NO CORE GROUP THAT'S SUPPOSED TO BE THERE ALL THE TIME"

in the regular world. I've asked people when was the last time you read a comic? Oh, I read one when I was a kid. How come you don't read them now? Oh, I don't want to read that kid stuff. But there are books that are for adults too. Oh, there is? I didn't know that they made any comics for adults. So then I'll pull out something and say here take a look at this and they're like wow, this is different.

Higgins: Larry, you've been in the business for about nine years, yet people would know you primarily from X-Factor. What other books have you worked on?

Stroman: Alien Legion, Cloak and Dagger, Dark Star, and World's Finest.

Higgins: Todd, how about you? What's your background in comics? Todd

Johnson: Basically I've been a comic reader since I was a kid, you know, all the super-hero stuff, I read everything. The rest of my background comes from owning two comic book stores in the Detroit area, The Comics Cafe.

Higgins: Is Tribe your first comics writing effort?

Johnson: Yes, Tribe is the first comic I've ever done.

Higgins: How did Tribe come about?

Stroman: I was asked by the Image guys if I was interested in doing a book under the Image title, and I said sure! So, I pretty much got together with Todd and asked if he'd be interested in writing it.

Johnson: There was no particular thing that came first...like the drawings or the writing or anything. It was just of a series of conversations...going back and forth with what we like in comics and what we'd want to see in our own comics. Things we've heard at conventions and from the people we know.

Higgins: What are the types of things you wanted to do with Tribe?

Stroman: Specific things? Nothing specific, it's just what we're interested in. We'd say, hey, you know, I just saw something on T.V., it would be great to have a character just like that person.

Higgins: Are you introducing any new elements in Tribe that, say, you couldn't introduce at Marvel?

Stroman: I don't think so. The only restrictions I hafd working for other companies, was the limitation of using established characters. Other than that I never really felt that I was being held back from doing anything.

Higgins: How would you describe Tribe? What is the concept behind it?

Johnson: I'd say the basic concept is just action, continuous action.

Higgins: Shoot 'em up, Blow 'em up?

Johnson: No, it's not shoot 'em up or blow 'em up. It's just more of a basic action type. It's not an ultra-violent book. It's not an ultra-relationship type book. It's just something that is going all the time, a real fast-paced, ever-changing type of book. And it's not going to be a thing where there are core members of the team. You could read it three issues later and there might be a whole different group. It's going to be a constantly changing situation because there's no core group that's supposed to be there all the time. It's kind of like a collection of individuals and once you're finished with the reason that you were on the team, you're just gone. This is not one of those membership for life type deals. If you wanted me and Larry to help you fight some bully that took your bike, once we got your bike back, we're out of it. You got your bike back and that's what you wanted,. and see you later.

Higgins: Will we be seeing characters die?

Stroman: You won't necessarily see characters die, you will see them evolve.

Higgins: Evolve?

Stroman: Because a lot of what this books' about is the evolution of the characters. The characters may start off as one type and eventually end up as another.

Higgins: Do you have a finite goal to this comic? In 12 issues, do you see the book being in a particular place, as far as character development goes?

Stroman: Just to keep an interesting comic. I mean, as far as a goal, I think if you want to set a goal for something you actually limit yourself before giving yourself a chance to grow.

Johnson: The readers are going to pretty much establish how we evolve. I think we would be locking ourselves in if we said that 12 issues from now this is where we're going to end up but then we get to issue number two or three and something has gone wrong that the readers are not accepting. We are not going to lock ourselves to this position. We want to grow with the fans that are growing with us.

Stroman: This is a basic curiosity that fans have in wanting to know everything. But at the same time, if they know too much, they get bored quickly.

Higgins: Tribe is set in Brooklyn. Why Brooklyn?

Stroman: That's where I live. A lot of stories take place in New York, and I feel, why not Brooklyn?

Higgins: Is this a problem for you Todd, living in Detroit and having to write about Brooklyn?

Johnson: No, not at all, because the whole story is not going to take place just in Brooklyn. Some of the teammates just happen to be from Brooklyn. We have sites in Manhattan, in Queens, in the Bronx, all over New York. We will still be using the New York City that people see in a lot of comics, it just happens that the home base will be Brooklyn.

Higgins: I also noticed that the bad guys in Tribe are corporate bad guys called Europan.

Stroman: That's basically what they are but the corporation is tired of bad guys. The bad guys themselves aren't necessarily part of the corporation, they're just people who were hired.

"I THINK IF YOU WANT TO SET A GOAL FOR SOMETHING YOU ACTUALLY LIMIT YOURSELF BEFORE GIVING YOURSELF A CHANCE TO GROW"

Johnson: There will be the mercenary types that are just the common super-villain caliber but not having anything to do with the corporation. They just happen to be paid to do the job. As Tribe continues everything is not going to be centered around the corporation Europan. There will be other things that happen involving super-villains and menaces that are out there in the city. Europan will be one of the main villains that we start off but it will evolve into other things.

Higgins: Is Tribe then almost a straight forward super-heroic or will you be adding a new twist that you feel is important?

Stroman: There's going to be all kinds of stuff. I mean for me to say this is just another super-hero team would be limiting myself. Why not try to do different things?

Higgins: Like what?

Johnson: In Tribe each individual has his own reasons, however selfish they might be. This is not where we all believe in this truth and justice thing and that's why we've joined this team to fight super bad guys. It's not like that. There's all types of reasons. Some people want revenge. Some people are just violent. Some people are doing it because they're goodie-goodie. There's a million different reasons why people join up for things.

Stroman: If you were to take 30 different people and have them join the same club, even though they're part of the same club, in their minds they're all different.

Higgins: Give me a run-down of what I can expect in Tribe. What kind of characters? What are some of their abilities?

Johnson: We have Shift who has super speed. We have Short Order who is able to split up into 50 different characters. We have Blind Spot who basically employs a kind of Stealth-like technology.

"I THINK THAT IT HAS BECOME MORE ACCEPTABLE TO BELIEVE IN CHARACTERS THAT EXIST IN THAT GRAY AREA BETWEEN GOOD AND EVIL"

Higgins: I thought Fly Girl was interesting. What does Fly Girl do?

Johnson: She has personal body armor that stores energy. It's like an energy net. The wings that you see are kind of detachable and they work almost in the reverse of Taser's. She can use the wings as an offensive weapon to wrap around people. The wings absorb energy packed into her suit.

Higgins: How about The Front?

Johnson: The Front is basically the master of many faces.

Higgins: Hannibal?

Johnson: Hannibal is the strong guy.

Higgins: Steel Pulse?

Johnson: Steel Pulse can turn into a living metal.

Higgins: Out Cold?

Johnson: Out Cold is a mercenary. He's actually a villain.

Higgins: Is that evident from the beginning?

Johnson: Yes. Definitely. Out Cold is totally by himself. He's only for himself.

Higgins: Is he part of Tribe?

Johnson: He is part of the Tribe book, but he is not a member of Tribe.

Stroman: There was a time when we were kids that we knew who the good guys were and who the bad guys were.

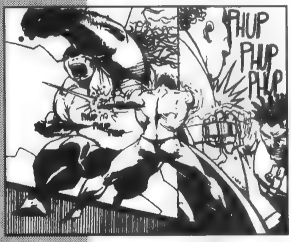
Higgins: This is true. Do you think this is a sign of the times?

Stroman: Yeah, I think it is. I think that it has become more acceptable to believe in characters that exist in that gray area between good and evil.

Johnson: I think our environment shapes that too. Good and evil is a hard thing to define now. You might grow up in an area where there are drug dealers who might also be your friends. And these guys look okay. They might be doing something that society thinks is bad, but these are the guys that you go party with and

they've got nice cars. By who's definition are they evil?

Higgins: Does the corporation play a large part in the development of Tribe?



Stroman: The corporation is the basis for where everything is centered. The actual corporation, as a whole, is not really going to be that much of the book.

Johnson: The corporation, basically, is the cause for some of the members having the powers that they have. A couple are the results of accidents that this corporation happened to have their hands in. Some of the guys decided to take on the powers that they have because of the corporation's dealings with them, to defend themselves for the most part. Most of the characters have technology-based powers and that is what Europan Corporation is all about. Basically, Europan is looking for small companies, companies that are kind of unknown at this time, that may have breakthrough technology that has not been registered or properly patented. Either right on the cutting edge or making a breakthrough. Those are the people they are looking for. They are looking to either take that technology or buy it. Whatever it takes.

Higgins: What sets your characters apart from the average superhero?

"WELL, FOR ONE THING, I THINK THE CHARACTERS ARE A REFLECTION OF OURSELVES"

Stroman: Well, for one thing, I think the characters are a reflection of ourselves.

Johnson: Both Larry and I are big boxing fans. So the guy with super speed is a former middleweight boxing champion. What happens is that he gets hurt in the ring and he has kind of a pulled muscle that can't be repaired, so he retires from boxing. He decides he wants to get back in the ring so he undergoes an experimental steroid treatment that ends up being a clinic sponsored by Europan. His reflexes and muscle control become destroyed even more by this experimental drug. When he's just walking around normal he's very slow, with slurred speech. It just didn't work at all. However, when his adrenalin kicks in and mixes with the chemicals, he gets this super speed. The reason he joined Tribe is that being a former boxer he enjoys the adventure. He likes the glory. He likes adoration of the crowd. The guy is just a typical celebrity.

Stroman: He's sort of like Joe Frazier after he retired from boxing.

Johnson: One of the things that this guy does on the side that might not be considered heroic is that he is still fighting in illegal fights, but he does not tell people that he has super speed. He makes bets on himself, and as he's losing, of course, the odds go up and they lay down lots of money. Then he kicks in with super speed. He defeats his opponents with a lot of inside shots and jabs and upper cuts that you can't see at super speed. Then he just knocks the guys out and takes the money. That might not be considered so heroic. It's basically a sham.

Higgins: When you came up with the concept for Tribe did this personal experience factor play a large part in why you were creating Tribe?

Johnson: Definitely. I think everything that we created came from conversations that we've had about our own experiences,

the things we like about comics, the things we dislike about comics, the things we'd like to see.

Higgins: I know that there are other black-oriented super-hero comics coming out. Does Tribe fit into that mold?

Stroman: We're not setting out to say here is a black comic book. We're saying to people, here is a comic book that is our best effort.

Johnson: I can't say that we wrote this in an effort to have it be like other people's books. Nor are we trying to make this niche for the black comic book market. This is just a comic that we wanted to do. We just happen to be two black guys. The market is really not set on any product, any type of demographics where there would be age or race or anything until the product is actually there. People like you, magazine writers and stuff, they will decide what the market is once the book comes out. They'll read it, they'll look at it, they'll see what it is and they'll say these are trying to reach blah, blah, blah. That's their opinion.

"WE PRETTY MUCH POLLED THE CROWD AND ASKED THEM, 'DOES THIS LOOK LIKE A HERO, DOES THIS LOOK LIKE A VILLAIN?' WE GOT SOME FEEDBACK ON WHAT WE WERE ALREADY DOING"

Higgins: Do you like meeting the people you are trying to reach? Such as at conventions?

Johnson: Conventions are great feedback. That's one of the things we did at last year's big show. We showed character studies of some of the characters we were going to use. We pretty much polled the crowd and asked them, "Does this look like a hero, does this look like a villain?" We got some feedback on what we were already doing.

Higgins: Did that have any effect on the development of the characters?

Johnson: Oh definitely.

Stroman: For instance, I did a drawing one day. I just sat down

"LARRY SAID IT WAS SOMETHING HE THOUGHT OF WHILE HE WAS ON THE PLANE. SO NOW I HAVE COMPLETELY WORKED IT INTO THE STORY WHERE IT MAKES SENSE TO FIT INTO TRIBE"

for about a half an hour and did this drawing. It was just kind of a throwaway thing. But I faxed it to Todd and he could not understand what it was. I said it was just a character, let's turn him into somebody. So we came up with a name and we started showing it at conventions, just to see how people would react to it. That actually turned out to be the most popular picture of all the pictures we had.

Johnson: So now I have a whole character created around this drawing just from first impressions. We have some real unusual work habits. I mean, it changes all the time. Larry might fax me a couple of characters and say, "We'll, do something with these guys, do something with this character." I look at it and I decide, "Oh, this looks like this character should do this," and then I'll try to work him into the story. For example, I've got a whole sequence from him of just action...and I didn't even know what it was. I said, "well, what is this?" Larry said it was something he thought of while he was on the plane. So now I have completely worked it into the story where it makes sense to fit into Tribe.

Stroman: I think we are going to use that picture for the cover of the third issue of Tribe. And it was strictly based on how people reacted to it.

Higgins: This sounds a lot like the classic way comics were created, like Kirby and Lee. Being as far away from each other as you are, you must be on the phone with each other all the time?

Stroman: That's right. My phone bill has gone from about 100 dollars a month to anywhere from 500 to 800 dollars a month.

Johnson: Mine too. We're keeping MCI and Michigan Bell and everybody very happy. Thank

God for Fax technology. That's a great way to do business.

Higgins: When you're developing a comic like this, a large part of it is the pitch that you have to put into it. Is trying to sell a comic book pretty tough business?

Stroman: It's probably the single hardest thing to do as far as selling the book. We're not just dealing with it from the point of view of how many people are going to buy it. You have to assure the publishers, distributors and store-owners that this is something that's going to be worth ordering. And there's never any guarantee of what's going to happen.

Johnson: The whole marketing aspect of owning your own book is very new. Neither one of us had ever even thought about it when we decided to do this book. Now you are in control of every aspect of getting the publicity out on this book.

Higgins: Any problems meeting deadlines?

Stroman: That's always a problem. I don't think there's anyone in this business who doesn't have a problem meeting deadlines. People who meet their deadlines are simply people who work all the time.

Higgins: How about working with Image? I understand that the concept behind Image is creator-owned books.

Stroman: Well, there are seven core members who formed their own company. Then there are people who come in under one of these seven guys. That's the person they work with to get their book done, for the most part. And the person who brought me into Image was Jim Lee.

Higgins: What would be the single difference between working for Image and working for Marvel?

Stroman: Just that we own our own books.

Higgins: And this means more profits to you?

Stroman: Yeah. But it also means more work. That means I just have to work that much harder. Marvel has three floors of people who are hired to work in all the different segments of the company, to handle different things. I, as a single person, have to handle just about everything concerning this book.

Johnson: It's having creative control. You decide what image goes on a T-shirt. You decide how big a poster's going to be. You decide the colors of the cover of the book. You're deciding everything. Every aspect of the product is decided by the individual creator.

Higgins: So there's no head office overseeing what you're doing?

Stroman: Not right now. A lot of people find it comfortable working for a company that pretty much handles everything. Other people would prefer to do it all on

"YOU HAVE TO ASSURE THE PUBLISHERS, DISTRIBUTORS AND STORE-OWNERS THAT THIS IS SOMETHING THAT'S GOING TO BE WORTH ORDERING. AND THERE'S NEVER ANY GUARANTEE OF WHAT'S GOING TO HAPPEN"

"IT'S VERY UNFAIR TO LUMP SOMEBODY AS ACTIVE AS DARK HORSE AND VALIANT AND MALIBU IN WITH JUST INDEPENDENTS"

their own, because they see that in the long run they get more out of it.

Higgins: What do you guys think of the growing independent comic market?

Johnson: I think it's not even fair to call it independent anymore.

Higgins: What would you call it?

Johnson: I think that it's no longer just a system, that it's just these big two and all these little independents. It's very unfair to lump somebody as active as Dark Horse and Valiant and Malibu in with just independents. There's such a wide range of books that might sell 300 copies a year...books that are selling better than the so-called big two. How can you link a book that sells a million copies with a so-called independent company?

Stroman: I think it was because Marvel and DC were considered "The" companies. Nobody else was really thought of because they had all of the good titles. But now you have a lot of good comic books coming out of a lot of different companies. So why would they be called independents? Simply because they're smaller?

Johnson: It's hard to change the terminology. While things are changing drastically, the industry has been slow to change what they call these third, fourth and fifth ranked companies. Before, `independents' was just a word to explain this little slice of the pie chart...to explain demographics or who controlled what part of the industry. Now that there are fewer slices of the pie, they don't know what to call it. It's still just pigeon-holed into this independent title. They've always called Chrysler, Ford and GM the big three. But now that the Japanese are here what do you call them?

Higgins: Where do you think this market is going?

Stroman: I think what it has done is bring new interest to the industry as a whole. I remember talking to people for years who said, "I'm either into Marvels or DC's." I'd say well, don't you read anything from any of the other companies? They would say, "Oh well, I don't consider them real companies." But whether you consider them real companies or not should have nothing to do with whether you read their books. I mean, there's a lot of good stuff coming out of

these other companies and I think it would be worth your while to give these other companies a look.

Johnson: The market is totally different now. It is a business within itself. It's not like a unit of the magazine distributors anymore.

Higgins: Are comic books more literate today? Is there a higher level of intelligence at work in comics?

Stroman: Yes.

Johnson: I think so too.

Higgins: The majority of comic books seem geared toward the 12 to 19 year old buyer. Do you think that is true?

Stroman: Yes, but there are lots of comics for everyone else too. The simple fact is, it's a business and you have a tendency to cater to where the biggest part of your business is.

Johnson: It's pretty similar to the movie industry. When you were growing up you were taken to all the 'G' rated movies. That's pretty much how comics are now. There are so many books being released now for the average kid. I mean, there's things that they can't even buy, but at our age, I mean, I can't even keep up with collecting comics now.

Stroman: Yesterday I was flipping through a bunch of books. I spread out on the floor and I didn't even recognize the majority of them. You say to people "I'm a comic book fan," because you've always read comics and you think you know more about comics than the average guy. But when you see the amount of books put out every month, it's like you're starting all over again because you have no idea what the majority of this stuff is.

Higgins: Being insiders in the comic market, is this good or bad to have this kind of glut on the market?

Johnson: The sole purpose of any business, including the comic book business, is to continue to do that business, whatever it takes. The fans are going to stop this glut from becoming too much. Because one of these days someone is going to come out with some glow-in-the-dark, scratch-and-sniff pop-out cover and nobody's going to buy it. Then it'll go back to marketing and they say let's not do that again, let's try something else. We do another gimmick and the gimmick fails. Then the signal is going to be sent that the market is tired of gimmicks, go back to the regular cover. Markets set all the trends.

"THE FANS ARE GOING TO STOP THIS GLUT FROM BECOMING TOO MUCH. BECAUSE ONE OF THESE DAYS SOMEONE IS GOING TO COME OUT WITH SOME GLOW-IN-THE-DARK, SCRATCH-AND-SNIFF POP-OUT COVER AND NOBODY'S GOING TO BUY IT"

Higgins: That brings me to the question, is there going to be a Tribe #0?

Stroman: Of course there's going to be a Tribe #0. (laughs)

Johnson: See, the problem with what you call gimmicks...I don't even think it's a problem...is that it's an endless circle that every aspect of the business shares. If I release a gimmick and you buy it and convince all your friends they should buy this great glow-in-the-dark cover, and they tell their friends and it ends up being priced at ten dollars...you have become part of the gimmick. You are an extension of the gimmick.

Higgins: Does the word come down from Image that you should try to enhance your books somehow?

Stroman: No, they will suggest things. But they don't tell us to do anything. We have the last word with our book. All they do is make suggestions and we decide if it's a good suggestion or not. They pretty much leave it up to us.

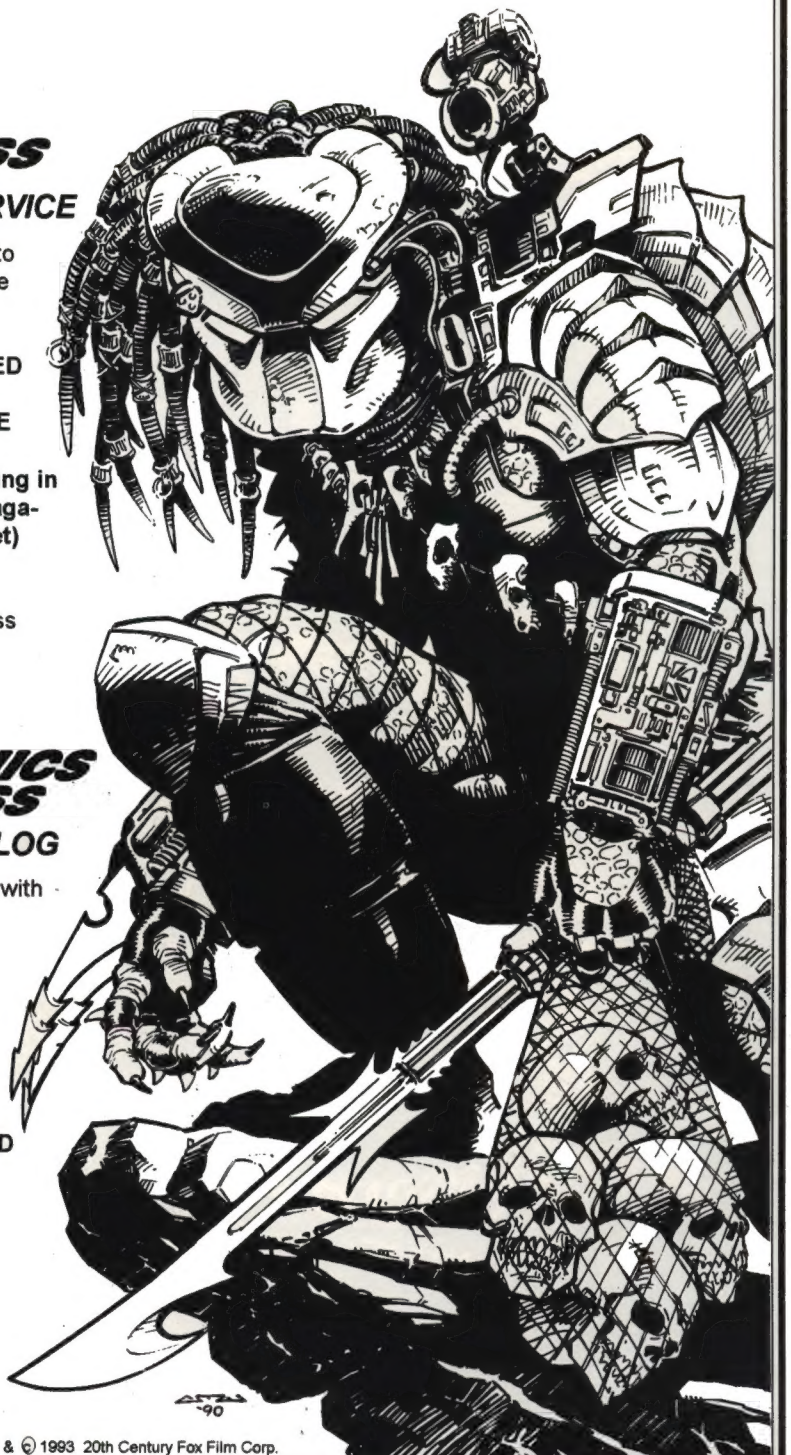
Johnson: Because many of the people on the Image team have already had books out that had different things that worked, they have a lot of suggestions as to what they think might work. Successful marketing is using things that have already proven to be a success but you're still the bottom line if you want to change anything. Any suggestions made would be solely to make Tribe more successful.

Higgins: What kind of enhancements can we look forward to in Tribe? Will there be Tribe cards?

Stroman: Oh, there will definitely be Tribe cards. And the first issue will be all black with a gold embossed logo. But there won't be any cards with the first issue.

A comics fan for at least 20 years, Tim Higgins is a freelance writer working and living in Allentown, Pennsylvania.

JUST THE SERVICE YOU'VE BEEN HUNTING FOR!



NEW ISSUE EXPRESS

EARLY ORDER SERVICE

We put the **SERVICE** back into subscription service with these features:

*** ALL NEW COMICS SHIPPED BAGGED & BOARDED**
*** NO SHIPPING OR SERVICE CHARGES**
*** HUGE SELECTION (Anything in the 300 + page Previews magazine, Previews sent w/packet)**
*** TOLL-FREE ORDER LINE**

Send $3 for New Issue Express Order Packet

NEW GRAPHICS EXPRESS

BACK ISSUE CATALOG

Our back issues sizzle to you with the speediest service in the industry:

*** 24 HOUR TURN-AROUND ON IN-STOCK VISA, MC, COD & MO'S**
*** ALL BACK ISSUES BAGGED & BOARDED**
*** ALL BOOKS GUARANTEED NM-M**
*** TOLL-FREE ORDER LINE**

Send $1 for New Graphics Express Back Issue Catalog

P.O. BOX 877-CT
WARRENTON, VA 22186
PH: 703-439-2489

Predator TM & © 1993 20th Century Fox Film Corp.